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## Connected, known and protected: African American adolescent males navigating community violence

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**Abstract:** While quantitative researchers have spent considerable time examining the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and educational outcomes, results are inconclusive and few have focused specifically on African American males (Aaronson, 1998; Brooks-Gunn et.al, 1993; Harding, 2003; Jencks & Mayer, 1989).

Urban ethnographies are great tool for unpacking neighborhood conditions, specifically how crime and community violence shape individual behavior. Collectively, ethnographies by Patillo, 2007, Small, 2004; and Venkatesh, 2000 claim that neighborhood violence restricts the quantity and quality of social interactions residents can have within their neighborhood or with other neighborhoods. These studies provide detailed description of the social processes embedded in urban communities, highlighting the need to understand how urban residents navigate and make sense of community violence exposure.

There are several qualitative studies whose focus on how African American males cope with community violence exposure provides an initial understanding of how responses to community violence shape educational outcomes (Anderson, 1999; Garot, 2010; Rios, 2011; and Voisin et.al. 2011). Generally, their findings suggest that urban African American males follow a "code of the street" (Anderson, 1999), prescribing hyper-masculine behavior, engagement in risky sexual behavior, emotional detachment, and academic disengagement (Anderson, 1999; Young, 2004). However, these studies focus on maladaptive coping strategies, sampling individuals who are most at-risk while overlooking resiliency factors.

I argue that in order to fully understand the relationship between community violence exposure and educational outcomes researchers must first step outside the classroom to understand the lived experiences of African American males in their neighborhood context. Important questions are: How do they navigate community violence and are there key relationships that inform their behavior and decision-making? How do they access support, and is that support gendered? Understanding the factors that shape individual behavior may help us understand both barriers and promotive factors to educational success.

This study examines the various ways relatively high-achieving African American adolescent males respond to community violence and the extent to which the responses influence how these young men think about school. This study uses an inductive qualitative design, which is best for describing and analyzing an individual's lived experience.

The application of Margaret Beale Spencer's Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) illuminates key relationships between various neighborhood factors and outcomes associated with direct and indirect violence exposures and educational outcomes. PVEST is used to inform and guide the study design, the development of interview protocols and the interpretation of findings.

Eighteen high-achieving (2.5 GPA and above) African American adolescent males from Westside College Prep, a charter high school located in Chicago, were interviewed twice over a nine-month period; four individuals participated in follow-up interviews. Participants were asked to describe their respective neighborhood conditions, individual community violence experiences, thoughts about school, and sources of support. High achieving students were sampled in order to understand how African American adolescent males, who live in violent neighborhoods, achieve successful outcomes. Identifying the specific strategies and supports available to resilient African-American males at home, school and in their community will inform societal understanding of

the barriers and opportunities present for individuals who, regardless of academic acumen and social support, share or live in similarly violent neighborhoods.

Several themes emerged from the interviews. First, participants managed their community violence exposure by becoming precisely aware of safe and unsafe locations in their neighborhoods. I have conceptualized and named the ways in which African American males interact with their community as "Cognitive Geocoding." At its core, Cognitive Geocoding is concerned with what an individual knows: precise neighborhood boundaries, the "right" people in the neighborhood, and relevant landmarks and institutions. These facets of knowing become the basis for one's mental coding of the environment, a process similar to a Geographic Information System (Rengert & Pelfrey, 1997). Participants use this information to assess their neighborhood as safe or unsafe based on address, location of previous violent events, and the time at which those events took place. Second, participants maintained: (1) a positive identity; (2) remained focused on their future, which often meant pursuing high academic achievement and career goals.; and (3) embodied a dual identity, a neighborhood self and a school self, which allowed them to move successfully between these environments. Various forms of emotional, academic and instrumental support from family members, friends and school staff were accessible and utilized to buffer the effects of community violence exposure.

This study challenges existing beliefs regarding how African American adolescent males respond to community violence by demonstrating how some African American are actually managing their experiences with community violence as opposed to coping. This study also highlights specific places for intentional programming and policy interventions at the individual, school, and community levels. (Abstract shortened by UMI.)

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